

Advancing the Junior Youth Program (II)

The junior youth spiritual empowerment program embodies a number of diverse elements that are complementary and for each, a systematic process of learning is needed. In the previous edition of this newsletter, insights were shared based on the experience of friends in implementing some fundamental aspects of the program, such as forming junior youth groups and forging relationships with parents and the community. This issue considers another important element of the spiritual empowerment program, and often a primary source of attraction for junior youth, the service project component. Animators and junior youth together learn how to plan and increase their capacity for carrying out meaningful and sometimes increasingly complex service projects. Apart from binding the group together in service to the community, such projects help the youth to translate their growing understanding into deeds, a capability that becomes stronger as they proceed through the program.

A second theme is the transition of junior youth into the main sequence of courses. The aim is to give the youth an opportunity to reinforce the moral and spiritual capacities they have been developing so they can continue “to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization.” From the accounts in this edition, it is clear that animators and junior youth coordinators are reflecting on important questions: What is the most appropriate way to open this avenue to the youth in the context of the continued development of their spiritual capacities? What is the nature of conversation between the animators and junior youth that makes the progression to the main sequence a natural step for youth seeking to build a better world? How do the friends offer junior youth the opportunity to proceed to the institute’s sequence of courses in a manner that does not compromise the junior youth program’s purpose of fostering disinterested service to humanity? What capabilities are required by tutors who have to accompany highly motivated young people?

The accounts in the last section discuss a third aspect of the program: the importance of collaboration between institutions and agencies at cluster and local levels in fostering and supporting the junior youth program. Efforts in this regard have been greatly assisted by the illuminating analysis of the Universal House of Justice in its 12 December 2011 message that clarified how the activities associated with the educational process and with expansion and consolidation represent one reality with one common aim, the building of a divine civilization.

***Service Projects Nurture the Stirrings of Altruism among the Junior Youth:** Junior youth have a natural desire to contribute to the well-being of their communities. Their participation in the spiritual empowerment program assists them to develop the attitudes and capabilities needed to serve their communities in a meaningful way. Through a process of consultation with the animator of their group, the junior youth can identify service projects of benefit to their neighborhoods, and through experience, their commitment and capacity for service increase.*

Guyana

A homefront pioneer in the **Georgetown** cluster relates his experience as an animator. After forming a junior youth group, he helped the youth reflect on their situation and decide on a service activity to better their community.

During our first junior youth group meeting, we decided to do an outreach. When we had grown to six people, we had our first meeting where we talked about rules, what we would like to accomplish and so forth. They were very shy and would rarely talk, so in our third meeting I asked, “What’s wrong? Why aren’t we talking? Are you guys scared of me or something?” One of the junior youth raised his hand and said, “Yes.” This made me laugh but also made me love them so much for their honesty in admitting that they were scared. In the school system you are always so afraid you might say the wrong thing. I once again shared that this wasn’t school and how we are all here to help each other and we shouldn’t be afraid. I also had to remind them several times not to call me “Sir” and just call me by my first name.

After this chat we talked about service projects. We looked at what was around us and what we could do. I suggested that they look at things that they might want to change. They were quiet and said they thought everything in the area was fine. I asked if there was really nothing that bothered them. Then one junior youth said, “I don’t like how the guys at the head of the road tease my sister.” My heart melted. We then talked about women and what the world would be like without them, what would happen if our mothers and sisters left, and more importantly, that we are all equal. We then decided to make a banner and hang it across the road so that everyone could see it. We came together the following week and made the banner: “Stop teasing our sisters and mothers; if they leave, we won’t have anyone to love us.”

We continued meeting weekly, and the junior youth were happy that neighbors commented on how nice their banner was. We then talked about what our next service project would be. The youth decided they wanted to put up street signs, and we discussed how this would help the community. They said that it would help the mail lady to identify which street is where and make her work easier. They all said they could make the signs themselves with old zinc if they flattened and painted it.

During the time I spent with this group, I visited the parents *every* afternoon and shared how the group was going. Therefore I was in the community every day, whether it was weekends for junior youth and children’s classes or weekdays for study circles, devotional gatherings, or visits to parents.

India

A resource person for the junior youth program on the Indian Subcontinent reported that service projects were a major theme in his recent consultations with animators. The results of these discussions are reflected in an account from an animator in the Tamil Nadu region. Service projects have become a regular feature of her junior youth group in Pudukulam, a village in the **Tirunelveli** cluster. Their first effort was to clean the dairy farm they had identified as a venue for their group meetings. After the animator participated in a cluster-level reflection of animators where they again discussed service projects and analyzed the experience of other junior youth groups, she returned to her village to have further conversations with her group.

The youth decided that every week they would clean one or two streets in their village. For two weeks they cleaned streets—gathering the garbage and dirt spread in the streets and collecting the rubbish from the drains. This they would usually do before their group meetings. Once, a parent told his son not to clean the drains, but the youth explained to his father that this is where they live and they should not feel bad about cleaning their village drains.

In the summer many people in Tirunelveli were affected by dengue fever. In their group meetings, the junior youth would also talk about dengue fever, asking the animator questions and sharing what they had learned about it at school. The animator met some doctors and asked them questions about the disease and was then able to provide added information to the junior youth. Their interest in dengue fever grew, and they learned how their area was infested with the mosquitoes that carried the disease. One of the doctors decided that he would visit the village, together with some medical students, and see what they could do to help. He told the animator that her junior youth could also assist. She shared this plan with the youth and with the junior youth program coordinator. She also visited their parents and explained the importance of the project so that they would allow their children to take leave from school on that day to help the doctors in their awareness campaign.

On the day of the service project, five medical students and one doctor arrived. The junior youth were ready and waiting for them. To prepare the junior youth, the doctor and his team first talked to them about dengue fever and ways to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. They shared with the junior youth the process by which mosquitoes lay eggs that are spread through waste and stagnant water. The team also told the junior youth that because they know each household personally, they should help the team to explain these facts to the families. The junior youth with the medical team formed small groups and covered more than 50 homes. They observed together how the families stored water in vessels and buckets, and they had conversations on how dengue fever occurs and how they can take precautions. They also helped treat the water families were storing in their homes.

At the end of the visits, it was clear that the junior youth were very happy with the campaign and the experience. The doctor and the students said how pleased they were that the youth had become involved and to see such a wonderful program. Seeing youth serving at such a young age was not common. This impressed them and led to further conversations with the animator and coordinator about the program and the Bahá'í Faith.

Guiding Junior Youth into the Main Sequence of Courses: *The House of Justice has explained that when junior youth are “accompanied for three years through a program that enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of 15, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization.” The accounts below illustrate how animators have fostered this transition for these youth in a seamless manner.*

Malaysia

Since a junior youth group in the **Subang Jaya** cluster was soon to complete the spiritual empowerment program, the junior youth coordinator began to visit the group more frequently and consulted with the animator on how to assist this group of youth to enter the sequence of courses and continue walking a path of service. The animator and the coordinator provided opportunities for the junior youth themselves to facilitate some parts of the text so that they could experience being an animator. At the same time, they had regular conversations with them about which path of service they might choose. By the time the youth entered the sequence of courses, they had already chosen their path of service, with most wanting to serve as animators.

The institute and junior youth coordinators consulted about this transition for the junior youth and agreed that whoever would tutor them would have to be an experienced animator or

at least someone who understood well the vision of the program. One group of youth has completed the sequence through Ruhi Institute Book 3 and will soon start Book 4, while another is studying Book 2. While the youth are advancing through the main sequence, they are also being accompanied in acts of service by animators with whom they are co-animating and by children's class teachers whom they are assisting.

In their visits to the **Johor Bahru** cluster, the junior youth coordinators noticed that some of the youth would soon turn 15, so they had a consultation with the institute coordinator and decided to organize a cluster-level camp to study *Drawing on the Power of the Word* and invited twenty 14 to 15 years olds to participate. They also identified potential tutors who could work with these groups of youth. Nine youth were able to participate in the camp, and the text was facilitated by the cluster coordinator. On the last day of the camp, the coordinators invited the tutors who would be working with them to participate. The tutors explained the sequence of courses and made plans with the respective youth they were to accompany into the sequence.

One junior youth coordinator shared an insight that the study of *Drawing on the Power of the Word* before youth enter the sequence of courses helps them see the material and spiritual dimensions of community building and enhances their experience when studying the institute courses. She observed that the graduates of the spiritual empowerment program are distinguished in the institute process by their enthusiasm and initiative. Some have invited their friends to join them in the study circle, and as a result, several more study circles have been formed. Many of them have already completed the first two books of the main sequence.

Tajikistan

One of the earliest efforts in establishing the junior youth spiritual empowerment program was in the **Khujand** cluster. A recent report from the Counsellor describes how the transition of the junior youth into the institute's sequence of courses has taken place over the years.

The junior youth program began in 2003 and after three years some 15 youth from the program entered the main sequence of courses. These youth had been in different groups, but they had strong bonds of friendship with the animators and didn't want to be separated from them. They wanted to become animators or serve their communities in some way. Generally it was the animators who would study the Ruhi books with them. Many of these first graduates of the spiritual empowerment program were from Bahá'í families, but one who was from the wider society has since become a member of the National Spiritual Assembly.

As the program grew, in neighborhoods, villages, and schools, the animators learned how to engage in conversations with the junior youth in a way that facilitated their movement into the sequence of courses. Since the concept of service was clear for the junior youth from their participation in the program and the service projects, the conversation emphasized that study of the Ruhi books would represent a continuation of their commitment to serve their families and their neighborhoods and enable them to serve in different capacities such as children's class teachers or animators. Another dimension of the conversation was that the books would help the youth progress spiritually and become better people.

Some of the youth struggled in their study of the courses in the main sequence, but no matter how difficult it was for them they would continue. They were the most eager

participants. Some even memorized the Tablet of Ahmad in their native language and when they chanted it at a gathering, members of the community were in tears.

In one village school there was a junior youth group that had been participating in the program for three years and in 9th grade, and at about age 16, it was the natural step for them to move into the sequence of courses. Their conversation was that the courses would help them progress and further prepare them to serve society. Continuing their study would also help them to become stronger spiritually and understand how to further contribute to the betterment of their village. The animators were concerned about how the youth and their families would react in this transition because of the conservative nature of the village and because there everyone knows everything about everyone. The animators were cautious, but the process went very well because the junior youth said that none of their lessons in school had brought them as much joy and that in the study circles they are able to have really deep discussions about their lives and how to bring about change.

Over the years nearly 70 percent of the junior youth completing the spiritual empowerment program in Khujand have gone on to study the main sequence of courses, and many are now at the forefront of the work in the cluster. Whereas initially the junior youth had contributed to the improvement of the physical and social environment of their school by planting trees, for example, and by actively participating in school life, those who continued in the sequence of courses are now contributing to the betterment of their village. Six of the youth have gone on to form their own junior youth groups.

Brazil

The brief story that follows illustrates how the junior youth program in the **Rouxinol do Paraíso** cluster has generated long-term commitment in the junior youth and the steps taken to ensure the program's sustainability.

In late 2011, we had 13 groups with 138 junior youth in São Luís. Nineteen completed the program and of these, nine completed Book 1, six of whom are already doing Book 5. In addition to the time spent studying the texts, we always stressed that they were being trained to serve and that materials would follow that would prepare them for service as children's class teachers, junior youth animators, or even tutors. We always used to say "we live to serve." In this way, from *Breezes of Confirmation* onward, we would prepare them that from age 15 they would have the chance to do other books. We noted that the youth who were the most committed to proceed through the sequence were those who had completed the whole junior youth program. One group of older junior youth had studied only *Drawing on the Power of the Word*, and only one of these youth entered the sequence and expressed the desire to become an animator.

One thing we learned last year is that when the groups move at a slow pace, their motivation decreases. The pace of studying and moving from one book to the next should be more intense. With a faster dynamic, the groups are more effectively sustained. Our problem was that the program was held in a school only once a week during the last hour of the school day. One hour was too short a time, and the school had no other space to offer for a longer time slot. Therefore, in consultation with the institutions, we decided to rent a place nearby and set up an "institute house." This space has helped increase the intensity of the study, allowed for more time to plan other elements of the program, such as service and leisure activities, and enabled the youth to begin Book 1 at a more intense pace than was possible at the school.

Collaboration at the Cluster Level: In its *Riqdán* 2010 message, the House of Justice refers to the “grassroots consultative process” that is going on and how it enables planning to “become more responsive to circumstances on the ground” and contributes to coherence. The accounts that follow describe how added spaces for reflection have resulted in greater unity of thought and action among those involved in the educational process, in their relationships with Area Teaching Committees, and also with members of Local Spiritual Assemblies.

Canada

One of the first steps in achieving close collaboration of the institutions and agencies working at the cluster level is to build a united vision. As described in the account below from the **Toronto** cluster, these friends engage in such a process at the beginning of each cycle. Focused attention on the junior youth spiritual empowerment program over time has influenced their conversation and relationships, enhancing collaboration and building synergy among the coordinators, Area Teaching Committee, and Auxiliary Board members.

The cluster agencies now meet once a cycle for a full day to develop a vision for the following cycle. The Secretary of the Regional Bahá'í Council, Auxiliary Board members, resource person, and the Counsellor are also present for this meeting. Time is first spent studying the guidance from the House of Justice. Attention then turns to reviewing the accomplishments of the previous cycle, trying to understand better how the pattern of action promoted by the Plan is evolving in neighborhoods and networks. As part of this review, the agencies have invited the neighborhood coordinators to join the meeting for a period of time, creating a space for the cluster agencies to learn from the most advanced neighborhoods and an opportunity for the neighborhood coordinators to reflect. The last part of the meeting is dedicated to determining audacious but realistic goals and elaborating specific strategies and resources to achieve them. This broad outline of the next cycle then guides the work of the secretary of the Area Teaching Committee and the coordinators who, with the support of the Auxiliary Board members, begin to operationalize the plan.

In the past, the coordinators for children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles would plan for growth in relative isolation from one another. One reason for this was that these core activities varied in strength depending on the neighborhood, and so the coordinators were focused on different neighborhoods and human resources. The situation changed when those familiar with the junior youth program and with teaching in neighborhoods were appointed as children's class coordinator and study circle coordinator. Now, when planning for the growth of the program, the resource person and coordinators look at the neighborhood and try to understand how to advance the three educational imperatives of the training institute. In this way, strategies for growth are devised and then executed together. For example, the main sequence coordinator and resource person are assisting the children's class coordinator to accompany graduates of the junior youth program to form children's classes, as well as introduce children's classes in areas where only junior youth groups exist. Visits to the neighborhoods are also coordinated so that within a week, the coordinators are able to visit each of the five neighborhoods. The coordinators and resource person also attend each other's reflection gatherings and consult about the content for each. In this way, the coordinators are now sharing learning and progress on the activities, rather than just providing information. They see the educational process as one, and in the way they create and execute lines of action, they are striving to put that understanding into practice.

A similar collaborative relationship is evolving between the secretary of the Area Teaching Committee and the cluster coordinators. The secretary works with a group of eight individuals, across four different neighborhoods, who help plan Holy Days, neighborhood reflection gatherings, and community meetings. They in turn work with the coordinators to ensure that participants of the institute are attending and, when needed, make contributions such as presentations during reflection gatherings.

Recently, the coordinators and Area Teaching Committee secretary also began consulting in order to support the youth who have completed the junior youth program to host and attend youth devotional gatherings, as a way to increase the devotional character of their neighborhoods and create a space where they can invite their peers.

France

A strong pattern of cooperation has emerged between the two full-time junior youth coordinators and their respective cluster agencies. This comprises regular planning and reflection meetings with the Auxiliary Board member, cluster growth facilitator, Area Teaching Committee, and other coordinators. In the **Paris** cluster, this collaboration was evident in the previous expansion phase, when the junior youth coordinator and the Area Teaching Committee planned to open a junior youth group in a new neighborhood, and the Committee mobilized the involvement of friends in the teaching project to support this goal. In the **Creteil-Nogent** cluster, during the last expansion phase the junior youth coordinator and the Area Teaching Committee planned an effort to reach youth from the wider society to train them as future animators. The coordinator and the cluster growth facilitator together made several home visits to speak with youth about the institute process and its objectives. They also co-tutored the first session of the study circle together. The Area Teaching Committees in both clusters have contributed to the growth of groups and other core activities by planning teaching projects around the goals set in consultation with junior youth coordinators, and organizing teaching teams accordingly. Attention is given to developing a coherent scheme of activities and to learning how a junior youth group can exert influence on the development of other activities in the cluster.

Vanuatu

A gathering was held in the **Tanna** cluster for institutions and agencies to develop a unified vision and a deeper understanding of the priorities of the Five Year Plan. Soon after, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Lenakel met and decided to reach out to Isini village in its locality. Through the efforts of the Assembly, there are now two junior youth groups in the village and one children's class. Participants for five study circles are waiting for tutors to help them begin the study of Book 1. Although this village traditionally was antagonistic toward the Faith, a number of its leaders are entering the institute process while their children are participating in children's classes and junior youth groups. They have expressed their gratitude to the Bahá'í community for offering them the chance to carry out such programs that are transforming their village.

A second two-day seminar for institutions was held in Tanna a few months later. The participation of 13 Local Spiritual Assemblies was particularly notable. The program was divided into four parts: study of sections of Book 5, study of the role of institutions in advancing the junior youth spiritual empowerment program and their obligation in fostering the process of transformation in their communities, the sharing of experiences gained since the last seminar, and planning. The main theme of the consultations was "reaching 1,000 junior youth in three cycles." The junior youth program in Tanna is already reaching over 500 junior youth and will reach out to another 500 to attain this goal. This is achievable if the program in schools can be

expanded to involve another 200 youth by the end of the first term of the next school year, and community groups reach out to another 300 junior youth by forming 10 new junior youth groups during each of the next three cycles.

During the seminar Assemblies shared their experiences in reaching out to the wider society to promote the junior youth program. These accounts were very inspiring and enabled the friends to appreciate the possibilities open to them. They heard firsthand how by drawing on the power of divine assistance and aligning their efforts with the aims of the Divine Plan, the friends have been able to penetrate even the communities that have been traditionally antagonistic toward the Faith. They also heard from other Assembly members about the imperative of creating bonds of friendship with individuals from the society at large, especially community leaders such as the chiefs.

A few of the Assemblies reported that since the last seminar they have been learning to consult on issues related to the Plan and that they are beginning to develop a sense of responsibility for the spiritual health of the entire community rather than just the Bahá'ís. These Assemblies are also gradually gaining the trust of the wider community, as the chiefs are turning to them for guidance, especially in relation to the moral development of the youngsters in their communities. Although the initial focus of the Local Assemblies was to advance the junior youth program, the wider community soon demanded that the Bahá'ís offer children's classes and study circles as well, and they are now beginning to see the transformation process taking root in their communities.

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